

# The Present Future

Six Tough Questions  
for the Church

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# **New Reality Number One**

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## **The Collapse of the Church Culture**

The current church culture in North America is on life support. It is living off the work, money, and energy of previous generations from a previous world order. The plug will be pulled either when the money runs out (80 percent of money given to congregations comes from people aged fifty-five and older) or when the remaining three-fourths of a generation who are institutional loyalists die off or both.

Please don't hear what I am not saying. The death of the church culture as we know it will not be the death of the church. The church Jesus founded is good; it is right. The church established by Jesus will survive until he returns. The imminent demise under discussion is the collapse of the unique culture in North America that has come to be called "church." This church culture has become confused with biblical Christianity, both inside the church and out. In reality, the church culture in North America is a vestige of the original movement, an institutional expression of religion that is in part a civil religion and in part a club where religious people can hang out with other people whose politics, worldview, and lifestyle match theirs. As he hung on the cross Jesus probably never thought the impact of his sacrifice would be reduced to an invitation for people to join and to support an institution.

We are witnessing the emergence of a new world. The church of Jesus is moving into the postmodern world. Its expression is going to be more different than most people realize or may want to imagine. The scale of the shift will rank along with the epochal transitions of ancient church to medieval, from medieval to modern.

This phenomenon has been noted by many who tag the emerging culture as post-Christian, pre-Christian, or postmodern. The point is, **the world is profoundly different than it was at the middle of the last century**, and everybody knows it. Even the church culture. But knowing it and acting on it are two very different things. **So far the North American church largely has responded with heavy infusions of denial**, believing the culture will come to its senses and come back around to the church. This denial shows up in many ways. Many churches have withdrawn from the community. An alternate form of denial has been the attempt to fix the culture by flexing political and economic muscle. Still another form of denial shows up in the church's obsession with internal theological-methodological debates designed to determine who the true believers are while the world is headed to hell in a handbasket.

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## All Is Not Well

If you don't need much convincing that the church ain't cuttin' it in terms of missional effectiveness, then you might want to skip this section. **This next stuff is for those of you who need convincing or who need ammunition for making the case to others.**

The collapse of the church culture can be demonstrated in several ways. One is through demographics. The percentage of Americans who claim to go to church each week has hung in the 40 to 43 percent range for thirty years. But I ask you, do you really believe those numbers? I recently asked a group of pastors in a conference setting whether any of them live in a community where 40 percent of the population shows up at church on Sunday. Only one raised

his hand. A study conducted in the late 1990s suggested Americans might be lying about their churchgoing habits to pollsters. It pegged church attendance at only 26 percent of Americans. (The study was conducted by sociologist Stanley Presser of the University of Maryland and research assistant Linda Stinson of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, who assessed church attendance by actual diary entries as opposed to responses to pollsters.) Quite a difference! Think about it. Does your town even have room in all the churches for 40 percent of the population? A friend of mine in a Southern Bible Belt town called every church in his town after Easter in 2001 and reported that only about 25 percent of the town attended church—on Easter!

Let's say you do believe the church attendance that people report. There is still cause for alarm. **The further down you go in the generational food chain, the lower the percentage each succeeding generation reports going to church.** The drop is from the 52 percent of builders (those born before 1946) and seniors to only 36 percent of gen Xers. What does this spell for the church in the future? Armed with this information, of course, churches are launching an all-out effort to reach gen Xers. I wish! Most churches have actually just written them off, waiting for them to grow up and learn to like what the church has to offer.

Or let's take a look at the unchurched population. A 2001 survey reported in the *Christian Science Monitor* reveals that the number of Americans who have "no religious preference" has doubled from 1990 to 2001, reaching 14 percent of the population. (These are not skeptics—only 1 percent identified themselves as atheists. This group doesn't see the church as vital to their spiritual life.) George Barna reports (*State of the Church 2002*, p. 17) that the unchurched population has grown from 24 to 34 percent in just one decade! (Barna defines people as unchurched "if they have not attended a Christian church service during the past six months, other than for special events such as weddings or funerals.") Among some subgroups the increase is even more substantial. Since 1991, the number of unchurched women has risen

from 18 to 30 percent; the number of unchurched Hispanics has jumped from 19 percent to 33 percent; the number of unchurched in the Northeast is up from 26 to 38 percent; and the unchurched population on the West Coast has risen from 29 to 40 percent. (If you've been in California on Sunday you may be suspicious that the reported numbers of unchurched are so low!)

**For evangelicals, the situation looks even bleaker.** Thom Rainer of the Billy Graham School of Evangelism at Southern Baptist Seminary reports some disturbing responses to the two frequently asked Evangelism Explosion questions (“Do you know for certain that if you died today you would go to heaven?” and “If you were to die today, what would you say to God if he asked you why he should let you into his heaven?”). The interview included about 1,300 persons of each of four generational groups that Rainer identified and investigated (5,200 in all). Analyzing the responses for evidence that the respondents were born-again (the evangelical definition of one's being a Christian) yielded the following results: builders (born before 1946)—65 percent; boomers (born between 1946 and 1964)—35 percent; busters (born between 1965 and 1976)—15 percent; bridgers (born between 1976 and 1994)—4 percent. Those interviewed in the bridger category were at least seventeen years old.

What about retention rates? Dawson McAlister, national youth ministry specialist, says that 90 percent of kids active in high school youth groups do not go to church by the time they are sophomores in college. One-third of these will never return. This rate of disconnection indicates a dilemma far more serious than mere youthful rebellion.

**A growing number of people are leaving the institutional church for a new reason.** They are not leaving because they have lost faith. **They are leaving the church to preserve their faith.** They contend that the church no longer contributes to their spiritual development. In fact, they say, quite the opposite is true. The number of “post-congregational” Christians is growing. David Barrett, author of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, estimates that

there are about 112 million “churchless Christians” worldwide, about 5 percent of all adherents, but he projects that number will double in the next twenty years!

**The bottom line is that the bottom line is not looking too good, no matter how you cut it.** Underneath the semblance of an American culture influenced by Christianity, the tectonic plates have shifted.

It’s more than numbers. The American culture no longer props up the church the way it did, no longer automatically accepts the church as a player at the table in public life, and can be downright hostile to the church’s presence. The collapse I am detailing also involves the realization that values of classic Christianity no longer dominate the way Americans believe or behave.

Sure, when there’s a community disaster or a national calamity such as 9/11, people scurry to church. This is not because they have a sudden interest in church but because they have a huge need for God, and they still seek sacred spaces to pray. Some argue that these church attendance spikes reflect more peoples’ need for community in times of shared grief than anything else. At any rate, within a few weeks of these disasters things are back to normal in terms of church attendance. The prognosticators who view these spikes as a renewal or beginning of a spiritual awakening remain frustrated. Most significant, a vast number of churches squander the window of opportunity by failing to connect with new people in these moments in meaningful ways that will bring them back.

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## **The World Has Ended**

We can place the enormous changes taking place against the larger landscape. We are entering a new epoch of human history called the postmodern age. The postmodern world will demand a new church expression, just as did the rise of the modern world. The church took years to accommodate itself to the modern world that adopted Galileo’s and Copernicus’s view of the universe

(deposing God from his fixed, top-of-heap position) and embraced Cartesian logic (pushing God to a diminishing domain of what could not be explained away by reasoning).

The modern world assaulted God, shoving him further and further into the corner with its determination to drain all the mystery out of life and the universe. Everything that could be explained scientifically further diminished the realm of the spiritual.

Having retreated into a diminishing corner for several hundreds of years, the North American church culture unfortunately now reflects the materialism and secularism of the modern era. Not only do we not need God to explain the universe, **we don't need God to operate the church.** Many operate like giant machines, with church leaders serving as mechanics. God doesn't have to show up to get done what's being done. **The culture does not want the powerless God of the modern church.**

We need to take courage. Though secularism and nihilism have taken their best shot to kill God, they have lost. The post-modern world, governed by quantum physics and its emphasis on relationships, is God's end run around the modern world. A quantum world stands ready to accept divine design and divine interaction. God himself is stirring the pot. If we can pay attention we will eventually discover that not only will we not lose God in this emerging postmodern world, we will find him again!

**Although the next church's shape is not yet obvious, the forces that will give it shape are.** They are futures that are already present. The first of these present futures is shocking and dramatic, because it declares that much of what we call church is not going to survive.

This first new reality is in many ways foundational to the other five that follow. As with all emerging futures it presents us with a choice. It is a choice between seeking answers in pursuit of the wrong question or noodling on the tough question posed by the arrival of the new world. Its creation has made obsolete much of our goals and activities in the church world. These no-longer-relevant pursuits are reflected in the wrong question.



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## Wrong Question: How Do We Do Church Better?

Faced with diminishing returns on investment of money, time, and energy, church leaders have spent much of the last five decades trying to figure out how to do church better. Emphases have come and gone in rapid succession. Church and lay renewal has given way to church growth, which has given way to church health. The results beg the question.

An entire industry has been spawned to help churches do whatever it is they decide to do. Consultants, parachurch ministries, denominational headquarters, and publishing houses prod and push the church toward whatever the current fad is. A spate of program fixes have consistently overpromised and underdelivered. The suggestions are plentiful: offer small groups, contemporize your worship, market your services, focus on customer service, create a spiritual experience, become seeker-friendly, create a high-expectation member culture, purify the church from bad doctrine, return the church to the basics. After decades of this kind of environment no wonder church leaders are a little skeptical about the “next thing” and why many feel that just about the time they catch up they fall further behind. But the mailings keep coming, the seminars keep filling up, and the conference notebooks keep stacking up on the shelves.

All this activity anesthetizes the pain of loss. It offers a way to stay busy and preoccupied with methodological pursuits while not facing the hard truth: none of this seems to be making much of a difference. **Church activity is a poor substitute for genuine spiritual vitality.**

The fallout from this frenetic effort to run in place is staggering in every direction. Consider the burnout of many ministers who struggle with the increase of expectations on the part of church members. Many men and women who entered the ministry with a clear sense of call to make a difference feel overwhelmed, bewildered, defeated, and generally underprepared for the challenges they face. Having packed their bags for the journey of the church age,

they now have no idea what should be in their leadership backpack for the current excursion. The portfolio of skills that once gave them standing in the community of faith no longer distinguishes them, ensures their effectiveness, or guarantees their continued leadership position. The senior pastor of a multiple-hundred-member congregation now must be manager of the corporate culture, headhunter, personnel manager, strategic planner, fundraiser, expert communicator, chief vision developer and caster, ministry entrepreneur, spiritual guru, architectural consultant, plus whatever particular assistance or role the congregation needs at any given time.

Fallout is not limited to the clergy. **Many church members feel they have been sold a bill of goods.** They were promised that if they would be a good church member, if they would discover their gifts, or join a small group, sign up for a church ministry, give to the building program, learn to clap or dance in worship, or attend this or that, they would experience a full and meaningful life. Trouble is, we don't have much evidence to support the assumption that all this church activity has produced more mature followers of Jesus. It has produced many tired, burned-out members who find that their lives mimic the lives and dilemmas of people in the culture who don't pay all the church rent.

**The faithful, maybe silently or not so silently, wonder when their ticket is going to be punched, when they are going to experience the changed life they've been promised and expected to experience at church.** In North America, these people have been led to believe that their Christian life is all about the church, so this failure of the church not only creates doubt about the church, it also leads them to all kinds of doubt about God and their relationship with him.

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### **Wrong Responses**

Many congregations and church leaders, faced with the collapse of the church culture, have responded by adopting a refuge mentality. This is the perspective reflected in the approach to

ministry that withdraws from the culture, that builds the walls higher and thicker, that tries to hang on to what we've got, that hunkers down to wait for the storm to blow over and for things to get back to "normal" so the church can resume its previous place in the culture. Those who hold this perspective frequently lament the loss of cultural support for church values and adopt an "us-them" dichotomous view of the world. Those with a refuge mentality view the world outside the church as the enemy. Their answer is to live inside the bubble in a Christian subculture complete with its own entertainment industry. Evangelism in this world-view is about churching the unchurched, not connecting people to Jesus. It focuses on cleaning people up, changing their behavior so Christians (translation: church people) can be more comfortable around them. Refuge churches evidence enormous self-preoccupation. They deceive themselves into believing they are a potent force.

Occasionally when I do consulting for congregations I insist that the church leaders meet off-campus in a restaurant during Sunday church time. I ask the group to look around and then pose the question to them: "Do you think these people struggled with a decision this morning of whether to attend church or to go out for a sausage biscuit?" Are you kidding? The church is not even on their screen.

Some churches go to the opposite extreme. Instead of choosing refuge, their response to the collapse of the church culture is to sell out to the culture. Just today someone told me of a church billboard that promised a ten thousand dollar winner for some person who would attend and sit in the right seat! This marketing scheme is more informed by the neighboring casinos than by the New Testament. Or I think of the "worship" service of a new church I attended a few years ago on Easter Sunday. The only music that the congregation sang was the soft-rock tune, "I Can See Clearly Now the Rain Has Gone." The pastor's message addressed how to have a better marriage. Not one word about Resurrection—and this on the one Sunday of the year guaranteed to

have pre-Christians in attendance! No one connected the dots for the attenders by telling them that their ultimate hope for better vision and marital intimacy is secured by divine intervention of the same God who raised Jesus from the dead. What a lost opportunity! What a pathetic and anemic response to the collapse of the church culture—a capitulation and denial of the power of the gospel. Trying so hard to be with it, this church just doesn't get it.

The point is, all the effort to fix the church misses the point. **You can build the perfect church—and they still won't come.** People are not looking for a great church. They do not wake up every day wondering what church they can make successful. The age in which institutional religion holds appeal is passing away—and in a hurry.

Before consulting one brand-new congregation, I visited their Web site. On their front page they declared that they were a church for unchurched people. Their stated vision was to “develop a congregation of over a thousand members on twenty-five acres.” The people they professed to be interested in reaching could care less about how big they are or how many they are. These numbers are how church people keep score. The belief by the leadership core group was that building a better church would automatically attract seekers who were in the market for a church. They didn't understand that church hopping is for church people.

**Church leaders seem unable to grasp this simple implication of the new world—people outside the church think church is for church people, not for them.** We may have saturated the market of people who want to be a part of the church culture, who want church the way we do it in North America.

The pursuit of the wrong question will continue to turn the wheel of the church industry, but it will do little to expand the kingdom of God. The need of the North American church is not a methodological fix. It is much more profound. **The church needs a mission fix.**

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## **Tough Question: How Do We Deconvert from Churchianity to Christianity?**

This tough question is about challenging the way we think about Christianity. North American Christians think in terms of its institutional expression, the church, as opposed to thinking about Christianity in terms of a movement. This shift in thinking is so profound that it resembles a deconversion, a deprogramming that we typically associate with helping people escape the clutches of a cult. Deconversion will require a disentangling, an intentional self-differentiation from church in order to gain perspective, a willingness to abandon church club member mentality for the sake of following Jesus.

**In North America the invitation to become a Christian has become largely an invitation to convert to the church.** The assumption is that anyone serious about being a Christian will order their lives around the church, shift their life and work rhythms around the church schedule, channel their charitable giving through the church, and serve in some church ministry; in other words, serve the church and become a fervent marketer to bring others into the church to do the same. In my denominational tradition I grew up with a telling euphemism used to describe when people became Christians: they “joined the church.” The reduction of Christianity to club membership can’t be said better than that.

**Many church leaders confuse the downward statistics on church participation with a loss of spiritual interest in Americans.** That’s because these leaders can’t think of Christianity outside of institutional terms. The truth is, although intrigue with institutional religion is down, interest in spirituality is up. A 2003 Gallup poll indicates that a vast majority of Americans say that religion has an impact on every area of their life. The cover of *Wired* magazine (November 2002) has a cross on it and devotes an entire section to God and spirituality. In fact, many have

observed that there is a spiritual awakening occurring in America. However, it is not informed by Christian theology, and it's not happening in the church.

People may be turned off to the church, but they are not turned off to Jesus. Jesus is popular. He still makes the cover of *Time* and *Newsweek* every year (generally around Easter). As I write these lines he's just come out on the cover of a prominent scientific journal. Church people sometimes get excited by this but fail to understand that people in the nonchurch culture don't associate Jesus with the church. In their mind, the church is a club for religious people where club members can celebrate their traditions and hang out with others who share common thinking and lifestyles. They do not automatically think of the church as championing the cause of poor people or healing the sick or serving people. These are things they associate with Jesus. People outside the church see the handling of the sexual abuse scandals by the Catholic Church as an indictment on the church as a whole. They believe the church is out for itself, looking out more for the institution than for people.

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## **A Theology of Mission**

**We need to recapture the mission of the church.** In both Old and New Testaments we encounter a God who is on a redemptive mission in the world. In fact, we are astounded at the lengths to which God will go in pursuit of his mission to redeem the crowning achievement of his creation—people.

The central act of God in the Old Testament is the Exodus, a divine intervention into human history to liberate his people from oppression and slavery. The decisive act of the New Testament is the divine intervention of God into human history to liberate his people from oppression and slavery. In the Old Testament Moses takes on Pharaoh to liberate his fellow Israelites (though Moses is one of them, he is not one of them). In the New Testament Jesus takes on sin, death, and Satan to effect

deliverance of captive kinsmen (though Jesus is one of us, he is not one of us). In both cases the deliverance is not just *from* something but *to* something. The Hebrew slaves were destined for the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Jesus promised his followers abundant life. Included in that deal is heaven.

In both Old and New Testaments all other mini-dramas and subplots relate back to this central theme. Throughout Old Testament history God is at work on behalf of his people, whether it is raising up a shepherd boy to whip a Philistine giant or causing a pagan Persian king to repatriate the Promised Land of Palestine. In the New Testament the Spirit comes to serve as the continuing presence of God in the lives of the liberated. Much like the pillar of fire and cloud by day given to ancient wilderness-wanderers in the Exodus to guide them, the Spirit of God superintends the journey of God's people, the followers of Jesus, as they spread out from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and beyond. This same Spirit would call up a man enslaved to religion and legalism and turn him into a point person in spreading the gospel of grace.

Many church leaders miss an all-important parallel in the two testaments' stories of God's interventions. God has a purpose and an assignment for the liberated people. After Moses delivered the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt, he brought them to Mt. Sinai just as Yahweh had instructed him. It was here Moses had encountered God in the burning bush and had held the conversation that launched him on his mission to Egypt. He certainly had to be curious about what was next as he climbed the mountain to be sequestered with Yahweh. He didn't have long to find out. There God revealed to Moses his heart for his people. It involved a purpose and a mission.

Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings, and brought you

to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.” (Exodus 19:3–6, New International Version [NIV]).

Yahweh rescued the Hebrews so they could partner with him in his redemptive mission in the world. They were chosen to be the priests of God, representing him to the whole earth. The significance of this designation as royal priests was not lost on those Hebrew ex-slaves. Royal priests in Pharaoh’s court were very powerful figures. They were second only to Pharaoh. The Israelites’ new status was quite a social promotion from their previous position as slaves. At Sinai, God delivered an assignment to his people. They were to tell the whole world about God and convince the world of his love for them. Unfortunately, Israel never quite grasped that their “chosen” status was for the sake of the mission. It incurred responsibility, not just secured the enjoyment of privileged position.

In the New Testament the apostle Peter reaches back to this episode to educate the new followers of Jesus about what it means to be in relationship with God through Jesus. “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9, NIV). Not only is the language reminiscent of Sinai and the commissioning of the people of Israel, the message is the same. The salvation secured by Jesus had come to them so they could pass it on to others. The church had inherited the purposes of God for Israel—to tell the story of the redemption as proof of God’s love for all. As the priests of God’s kingdom they had been given the responsibility for brokering the relationship between God and humanity.

In the book of the Revelation this special relationship between God and his people is rehearsed one final time. “To him



who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever!” (Rev. 1:5b-6, NIV). And in a scene in the throne room itself, those in attendance break out into song:

You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals,  
 because you were slain,  
 and with your blood you  
 purchased men for God  
 from every tribe and language and  
 people and nation.  
 You have made them to be a kingdom  
 And priests to serve our God,  
 and they will reign on the earth.

*Rev. 5:9–10, NIV*

Last summer the daughter of a friend of ours got married. My wife directed the wedding and decorated for it. My job was to be transportation for a bagpiper being brought in by the bride to surprise the groom (he loves bagpipes). I picked up the bagpiper from a reunion of World War II veterans. The group converges each year from all over the country to rehearse war stories and celebrate the living. They are a tight group. The reunion dynamic of war veterans who shared combat mission experience, who risked life together, who dealt with death together, is a special fellowship. This is the picture of the people of God forever united to the One with whom they have shared a life-challenging and life-transforming mission. The obvious kinship that God feels for the redeemed is tied to the special bond of being on mission together.

**The North American church is suffering from severe mission amnesia. It has forgotten why it exists.** The church was created to be the people of God to join him in his redemptive mission in the world. The church was never intended to exist for itself. It was and is the chosen instrument of God to expand his

kingdom. The church is the bride of Christ. Its union with him is designed for reproduction, the growth of the kingdom. Jesus does not teach his disciples to pray, “Thy church come.” The kingdom is the destination. In its institutional preoccupation the church has abandoned its real identity and reason for existence.

God did not give up on his mission in the Old Testament when Israel refused to partner with him. God is a reckless lover. He decided to go on with the mission himself. We do not need to be mistaken about this: if the church refuses its missional assignment, God will do it another way. The church has, and he is. God is pulling end runs around the institutional North American church to get to people in the streets. God is still inviting us to join him on mission, but it is the invitation to be part of a movement, not a religious club.

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## **The Beginning of a Movement**

**When Jesus came on the scene he entered a world very similar to our own in terms of its spiritual landscape.** Institutional religion had collapsed. No one really believed in the Greek or Roman pantheon of gods. People knew these beings were mere projections embodying human traits (and not just the good ones!). Judaism was also exhausted. The Sadducees (in charge of the Jerusalem Temple-based activity) had sold out to materialism and ritual. The Pharisees (holding sway in the synagogues, thereby dominating the religious agenda for most Israelites) had produced a dead religion in search of the moral high ground with God. When Jesus said, “I see dead people” (the Pharisees reminded him of tombs, Matthew 23:27 and Luke 11:44), he was not prophesying; he was stating a reality. The people of Israel in the first century knew Pharisaic Judaism had lost its luster. This is why they flocked to John the Baptist and to Jesus.

The collapse of institutional religion in the first century was accompanied by an upsurge in personal spiritual search for God and salvation. Evidence of this is seen in the two great challenges

to Christianity during its early years—Gnosticism and Mithraism. In Gnosticism personal salvation was gained through possession of certain knowledge about God. In Mithraism adherents gained entrance to the cult by adopting a very strict ethical-moral code of personal conduct and then undergoing certain rites known only to the religious members (this is why this and other similar religious cults were called “mystery” religions). The emphasis in both these cases was personal salvation, not institutional development.

**Jesus tapped into this widespread sentiment of disillusionment with religion but hunger for God with his teaching about the kingdom of God and how people could become a part of it.** His emphasis was on universal accessibility as opposed to the exclusivity of the Pharisees. His teaching was a radical departure from the legalistic behavioral approach of Judaism. He taught and practiced grace in terms of how God deals with people. At the same time he elevated standards of personal behavior by looking past mere externals to internal heart motivations. He preached that God was *for* people, not *against* them. He defined the litmus test for genuine spirituality in terms of one’s relationships—our relationships with God and with other people. He declared the first and second commandments as these: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Luke 10:27, NIV). This emphasis by Jesus went way past the doctrinal purity standard used by the Pharisees.

**The movement Jesus initiated had power because it had at its core a personal life-transforming experience.** People undergoing this conversion could not keep quiet about it. They had discovered meaning for their life and wanted other people to experience the same thing. They had a much more powerful spiritual tool at their disposal than coercion or legalism. They had grace and love.

This is the dynamic of genuine Christianity. This is what turned the world upside down at the beginning of the Christian era. The time is ripe again for recapturing this initial appeal of the

gospel. People are interested and searching for God and personal salvation through a relationship with him. Increasingly they are not turning to institutional religion for help with their search. In fact, just the opposite is true. They don't trust religious institutions because they see them as inherently self-serving. So they are off on their own search for God.

The current spiritual awakening in North America lacks Christian content and file systems. This is the scary part of it. Left to their own imagination people will devise all sorts of crazy stuff about God, from New Age crystals to self-enlightenment. But this is also the opportunity of the current spiritual landscape. People are open to revealed truth of God if they can get it.

Unfortunately, the North American church has lost its influence at this critical juncture. It has lost its influence because it has lost its identity. It has lost its identity because it has lost its mission.

The correct response, then, to the collapse of the church culture is not to try to become better at doing church. This only feeds the problem and hastens the church's decline through its disconnect from the larger culture. The need is not for a methodological fix. The need is for a missional fix. **The appropriate response to the emerging world is a rebooting of the mission, a radical obedience to an ancient command, a loss of self rather than self-preoccupation, concern about service and sacrifice rather than concern about style.**

The collapse of the church culture, along with the five other realities I will discuss, is God's gracious invitation to the church to rediscover itself. It will do this by dying to itself and coming alive to God's mission.

In the summer of 2002, the country spent several anxious days concerned about the fate of nine mine workers trapped in a mine in Pennsylvania. Rescue efforts involved several innovative strategies, including pumping heated air down a shaft. As the workers emerged from their ordeal, so did the story of their survival. One key element was their decision to huddle together to stay warm

and in touch with one another in the cold darkness of the collapsed mine.

The church in North America far too often resembles these miners. Feeling trapped in the collapse of the church culture, club members are huddling together in the dark and praying for God to rescue them from the mess they are in. This is the refuge mentality that pervades the mentality of many congregations and church leaders. Instead, the church needs to adopt the role of the rescue workers on the surface. They refused to quit, worked 24/7, and were willing to go to plan B or whatever it took to effect a rescue.

That's the church's mission: to join God in his redemptive efforts to save the world. People all around us are in darkness. They are going to die unless someone finds a way to save them. Trouble is, the church is sleeping on the job. Too many of us have forgotten why we showed up for work.

Even worse, many of us never have known.

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## **New Reality Number Four**

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### **The Return to Spiritual Formation**

He approached me at the end of the conference I was leading. “I teach the new Christian class,” he said. “I’m just surprised. You know, they don’t know anything.” He went on, shaking his head. “They don’t know anything about the Bible, about God, about sharing their testimony, or about the church.”

His remarks typify club member attitudes: “We don’t do diapers.” Club members want people coming into the church and into the faith fully grown and church trained.

He pressed me, “What do you think I ought to teach them?” I could tell the question was a prelude to a demonstration. “What are you teaching them?” I asked. “I’ve put together a notebook,” he said as he pulled out his exhibit. It would have taken two llamas to carry that thing.

I drew a deep mental breath and plunged in. “I bet there’s a lot of good stuff in there,” I said. “You might consider another approach. If I were responsible for coaching a group of brand-new Christians, I think I would conduct the group like a marriage enrichment seminar. These people have just gotten married to Jesus. They have fallen in love with him and have just committed themselves to him for life. How do we help them keep their relationship growing?” To drive the point home I added, “I’m so glad that my wife did not turn to me on the way to our

honeymoon and say, ‘Now that we’ve gotten the wedding ceremony behind us, I’ve taken the liberty of putting together a notebook. . . .’” I don’t think he bought the approach or saw the humor.

Christians (evangelicals especially) emphasize that our connectivity to God is through a relationship with Jesus. We talk about giving him our hearts or inviting him into our hearts. We use love language to talk about committing our lives to him. Then, as soon as the deal is done, we switch the language and go to head stuff. We pull out the notebooks. We go over what we believe, information about the church, and so on.

I have learned a few things about Cathy in our two-plus decades of marriage. I have discovered what she likes and doesn’t like. I have learned about her family. I don’t know *about* her. I know *her!* (She just called while I was writing. From her first word I knew her mood, not from her words, but from her tone.) She and I have achieved an intimacy that comes from hanging out together, sharing dreams and hurts, working on projects together (like raising two daughters, pastoring and leading a new church, redecorating rooms—she’s an interior design consultant), experiencing leisure and fun together, and from sharing countless days of more routine experiences. I can finish some of her sentences. I know what she thinks about a lot of things now without having to ask anymore. We have had both romantic moments and contentious arguments. Even while we’ve been developing as individuals our growth has been bent toward each other, like plants searching for sunlight will bend toward it. This is how a relationship develops with people you love and live with.

A person who claims to be a follower of Jesus claims to have a relationship with him. This means they know *him*, not just *about* him (this was Paul’s claim in Philippians 3:10). Yet **we have turned our churches into groups of people who are studying God as though they were taking a course at school or attending a business seminar. We aim at the head. We don’t deal in rela-**

tionship. And we wonder why there is no passion for Jesus and his mission? It's because, in our efforts to disciple people, we've been barking up the wrong tree.

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### **Wrong Question: How Do We Develop Church Members?**

The pursuit of this question makes good sense if the issue is getting people converted to the church, if living a Christian life is considered mainly to be about supporting church activities, if the assumption is that the primary expression of one's talents and gifts is at the church or in support of church programs, if the operating premise is that following Jesus is about joining a church and adopting a church member lifestyle, if we believe that people will grow more like Jesus by hanging out at church, if we want the measure of a person's spiritual maturity and "commitment" to be counted in institutional terms. These assumptions are frightfully prevalent in the church culture. And even more frightening, they may be preventing people from entering the kingdom.

Consider what most churches hand people when they join the church: a new-member packet. What's inside? Offering envelopes (the clear message: club dues are payable immediately and regularly), a church directory (sometimes with pictures of fellow club members), a church calendar (a list of club activities), a church officer and committee list (these are the important club members), and a constitution and bylaws (club rules). Also included in many packets are "opportunities for service"—usually a listing of church jobs that need doing.

The new-member packet signals to recipients what's really important—how to work your way into the club and get the most out of club membership. In the old days denominations and church consultants even offered courses on "member assimilation." People don't want to be assimilated. But that's what it feels like for many people who joined the church only to become part of "the collective" and lose their own individual lives.



**We have made following Jesus all about being a good church member.** The scorecard is all about church membership, church participation, and church support. We are training people to be good club members, all the while wondering why our influence in the world is waning. The truth is, the North American church culture extracts salt from the world and diminishes the amount of light available to those in darkness who need to find their way.

Jim (not his real name) asked if he could talk with me for a few minutes. He began, “I just feel like something is missing in my spiritual life.”

“Tell me about your spiritual journey,” I responded.

“I believe in God,” he stated, and then for the next ten minutes detailed a fabulous club member dossier. This man had “joined the church” when he was young. He had held many positions of leadership: Sunday School teacher and director, deacon chairman, pastor search committee chairman; the list of committee appointments was impressive. This man obviously had worked hard in the church and had the respect of his fellow church members. Then he repeated, “But something is missing.”

“Jim,” I said, “in this whole discussion you mentioned God once, saying you believe in him. The devil can say that. You’ve not mentioned Jesus at all. Could it be that Jesus is what you’re missing?”

Many churchgoers, like Jim, feel as though they’ve been sold a bill of goods. They have been told if they will only conform to church culture expectations, they will experience a wonderful Christian life. In fact, the sermons they hear talk about God some (or a lot) and even suggest that they are supposed to be experiencing abundant life. They have shown up, given, supported, studied—and they keep waiting for their ship to come in. The truth is, they feel cheated. They feel as though they’ve been promised something that they haven’t gotten. And many of them are experiencing a growing crisis of belief—not just about the church but also about God. They know their life is not much different or no different from those of people who have Sundays free to spend with their families and give to charities they believe in. Although

many church observers point to this as an indictment of church members, I see this as an indictment of the church culture.

I don't think the answer is to raise the bar for church members in terms of institutional support. **I think the solution is an abandonment of the church culture idolatry and a radical reintroduction of spiritual formation.**

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### **Tough Question: How Do We Develop Followers of Jesus?**

A friend of mine once asked me, "What is this kingdom business you keep talking about?"

"The kingdom is people," I replied. People are built to last. The Scriptures say that every other created thing is eventually gone. When the kingdom fully comes, people will finally realize their full potential as beings created in the image of God. Jesus hinted at this when he spoke about abundant life. To live abundantly is to borrow the future into the present. This means that helping people develop emotionally, physically, and relationally is all spiritual. There is no sacred-secular dichotomy when it comes to spiritual formation. It includes personal spiritual disciplines, but it also includes the stewardship of our relationships, our work, and our life mission.

This question changes everything. It challenges our beginning assumptions in the church business and it snaps tension and accountability into the evaluation of what we do in terms of the end result of helping people grow and develop. What if, when pastors get together, the question they asked each other was not, "How is your church doing?" (This is the most frequently used pickup line used at church leadership conferences and denominational gatherings.) In my denomination it's, "How's your Sunday School doing? or music program? or youth program?" or any number of other programs. The church culture has trained church leaders to have these conversations. Almost all the questions for denominational research and reporting are about church institutional life: how many showed up, how frequently, how busy they

were in church activities, how much did they give, and so forth. This is how we keep score and determine champions, division leaders, and losers. What if, instead, we asked about people, not the institution? What if denominational reporting inquiries asked, “What percentage of your congregants feel they grew to be more like Jesus this past year?” What if church leaders asked each other, “How is God at work in your people?” or “Where do you see Jesus bustin’ out?”

As part of a denominational futuring process a couple of years ago, we interviewed hundreds of South Carolina Baptists. We asked them about their “heart hopes” for the future. Although they wanted to see more people coming to church, they registered a very clear aspiration for themselves: they want to grow at church, not just put in time. The feedback was so significant that the futuring group fashioned an initiative that said we would help every congregation implement an intentional spiritual strategy for its constituents. My colleagues and I knew we would have a tough time communicating this initiative because church leaders think this is a given. All that’s necessary for people to grow as a Christian, they think, is to offer the typical array of church educational programming. Unfortunately, people aren’t growing like they want to or so many people wouldn’t be begging to experience it.

Based on what we discovered in our heart hopes sessions, our convention (the South Carolina Baptist Convention) reorganized our staff in part to give attention to this need. We moved away from a program model staffing plan (consultants for Sunday School, Discipleship Training—the denominational educational programs) and created a Congregational Spiritual Development Team with consulting services offered around life stages: adults, youth, college, preschoolers, children. The only reservations to the change came from, you guessed it, church culture leaders who can only think in institutional, program terms. “What happened to Sunday School?” they asked. They see the Sunday School (a church program) as the point rather than the issue being the

church's offering Bible study or the church engaging in intentional people development.

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## **Lessons from the Y**

A few years ago my family became charter members of a new YMCA that was being built near our home. I had never belonged to a health club before. One reason was that those exercise machines have always intimidated me. They look like implements of torture (and the looks on the faces of the people using them confirmed this). I was embarrassed that I knew so little about the equipment when everyone else there seemed so much at home.

This is exactly the same dynamic experienced by people outside the church bubble when they consider coming to church. They don't know the right code words, secret handshakes, or anything. They don't understand "church-speak." I am convinced we use code words and phrases in church to keep from dealing with God. Last night, after I pleaded passionately with a congregation about the need for renewal of the North American church, the pastor got up and said, "Thank you for the challenge. I hope we will all go out and apply this to our lives." I wanted to scream! What an innocuous response! So typically churchy. We pretend to be serious by offering some platitudinal phrase about "challenge" or "commitment." I would have rather the pastor had gotten up and said, "I think this man has overstated the case and I'm not nearly as discouraged as he is," or "I think this guy is full of Brussels sprouts," or "I can't believe anyone paid by our denomination would say such things," or something that meant something. Instead, church-speak allowed the listeners to avoid genuine accountability. The pastor gave the members permission to return to spiritual somnolence. I believe I heard the rhythm of snoring return as they shuffled out.

Back to the Y. I overcame my tentativeness about my lack of upbringing and joined when the Y opened up. As part of the deal, the Y gave me the opportunity to make an appointment with a

personal trainer. I could tell him what I wanted to accomplish in that room with all that equipment in it. He could then customize a personal training schedule to help me realize my objectives. For the next few months I watched as fellow health enthusiasts carried small clipboards around with them as they moved from machine to machine. Each of them had been given their prescribed exercise regimen on cards. Some intriguing things happened. Some people shrunk parts of their bodies. Others bulked up. Still others moved some body mass around. One day while watching Jason (the trainer) take another new inductee through an orientation I thought, what if the church took this same approach?

Let's return to that person or family who has just become a follower of Jesus and has joined a congregation or is considering becoming a part of church life. **Instead of dumping a packet of church club member stuff on them, why not interview them about what they would like to see happen in their lives in terms of their spiritual development and personal growth?** Maybe they've never thought in those terms. (Club members who have practiced churchianity for years would have more difficulty with this interview than spiritual seekers. Can't you just imagine how many paragraphs of church-speak a person could generate to keep from saying anything that could lead to accountability?) Once a life coach or spiritual development coach completed this interview, they could then fashion a customized personal growth strategy for the person or family. This developmental strategy could pull from all the things the church offers currently. The coach might say, "Based on your interests, we recommend the Tuesday morning ladies' Bible study and suggest you check out the group that ministers once a month in the juvenile detention facility downtown," or whatever. This could be done for each family member. What if the coach then said, "Let's get back together in a month (and maybe every month for some period of time) to check on your progress"?

Imagine the difference in how this would come across to the new member. Instead of signaling to them that they are to find their way into church stuff and make the church successful, the

focus is completely turned around. The church treats them as a market of one, convincing them that the church is there to help them develop an abundant life promised to them by Jesus.

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## **Benefits of Life Coaching for Spiritual Growth**

Just this morning I reached the voice mail of a friend. On her message she identified herself as a counselor and life coach. (She and I had talked about her adopting the life-coach role long before Dr. Phil came on the scene.) She will be joined by many more in the therapy world who want to move away from a clinical approach to counseling to more proactive intervention.

The traditional life-coaching medium was parenting. We all know that parenting has been on the decline over the past few decades. We used to talk in terms of “reparenting” people to help them readdress life issues that sabotage their development. We are now talking in terms of “parenting” people who have never been parented. Talk to any student minister. They are dealing with many kids who have raised themselves. I’m not just talking about street kids; I’m talking about kids living in suburban neighborhoods who have everything material but have been shaped more by MTV than by their parents. Talk to military officers who deal with eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds who are coming to them largely unformed.

**I am recommending that churches provide life coaching for people. We need to view this as spiritual formation.** We cannot take the approach that we just need to teach people the classic spiritual disciplines, assuming that a person already has a developed center. We must use spiritual disciplines to help people form the center. We must attend to their self-awareness and life relationships. The process starts with that interview just described in the previous section. And by the way, you wouldn’t have to wait until a person decides to become a member. Life coaching could happen whenever the person signaled they were ready. It can start when they are children. It can target individuals or family units.

If your church pursued life coaching for people, you would accomplish at least seven things:

1. You would be communicating to the person that personal growth and spiritual development are anticipated and even expected.

2. You would convince them of your enormous care for them and that the church is there for them rather than expecting them to be there for the church.

3. You would be doing research to determine what needs and hopes the church should be addressing. If a bunch of people were asking for the same thing, it would signal a new development need or a new ministry opportunity. This would be a very different approach from beginning church ministry planning with calendars and budgets.

4. You would strengthen the intentionality of what you are doing in terms of congregational activity and programming. If, over time, you noticed that a particular activity was not effective in helping people grow, you could quit investing staff time, money, facility use, and so forth, in it and reallocate the resources into something that brought more return on investment.

5. You could use this as an opportunity to introduce people to and educate them about spiritual disciplines and dynamics of spiritual growth. Jason, the Y trainer, gives a tour of every machine in the fitness room to health club neophytes like me. The reason is simple. As a newcomer to that world I didn't even know some of the possibilities available to my body through these machines until I was made aware of them. The same is true for people in the spiritual world. Many people in church have never encountered the disciplines of prayer, fasting, Bible study, and ministering to others. We assume people will pick these up along the way if they just hang out in the church long enough. That's like thinking that if I'll just go down to the Y once a week, hang out with other club members, attend meetings, eat doughnuts, drink coffee, and watch others work out, I will look like I've been exercising. The reality is that if I want the benefits of exercise, I

will have to get on those machines and sweat, grunt, and contort my face (apparently that helps to gain the benefits of a workout regimen). **The Y staff would never say, “He’s a faithful and committed member” and consider it a success if I showed up regularly but didn’t exercise. Yet we do this all the time in the church culture.**

6. You could prescribe growth regimens for people that intentionally infuse spiritual development in activities they are already pursuing. The process of life coaching could further the development of a missionary force by helping people see that God has already placed them in a job, neighborhood, relationship, or life assignment where their gifts and influence can be developed as they partner with God’s redemptive mission in the world. It is absurd that schoolteachers who have contact with dozens of students every day be underdeveloped as to their missionary potential. They usually have more face time with students than anyone else (even parents). Why in the world would we do anything that would make them feel or believe they have to pursue their personal spiritual development down at the church and away from the classroom? The same would be true for a shop owner who employs workers, or a manager who supervises other people’s lives, and so on. It would even be true for families. Didn’t Jesus slam the Pharisees for failing to take their religion home? He disparaged their practice of tithing to keep their institution alive while ignoring needs even in their own families. Imagine helping people see how God can get into the life they already have instead of asking them to give up their life for the church.

7. You could leverage growth into other arenas of life in addition to the spiritual domain. People often need help in life issues that, though they do not exclusively represent a spiritual need, carry spiritual implications. Financial planning needs to replace stewardship education in most congregations, for instance. The church should address a wide range of life concerns, including life skills (parenting, cooking, sewing), relationships (blended families, marriage and family issues), and health concerns (exercise, nutrition,



even pharmaceutical awareness). Living has become so frenetic for many people that life gets pushed to the side, postponed for some future time when we have time and energy to pursue it. One of the real benefits of life coaching could be in helping people “get a life” by helping them with their decision-making processes.

I suspect there are people in every congregation who could be helpful as life coaches. In most cases life coaching will occur in a variety of relationships and venues in the congregation. But it will not occur unless we free up people and time to do it. This means less church activity and more people development.

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## **An Agenda for Spiritual Formation**

The deal is this: **we have assumed that if people come to church often enough they will grow.** We’ve got to be much more intentional than this. The current approach to spiritual development focuses on the members’ involvement in church activity. What if we took out a clean sheet of paper and asked, “What do we want people to learn?” and then went to work on this? We might even need to call off church to get some of these things done (as long as we collect the offering).

### **Worship**

People are built to worship. Just go to any college football stadium in the fall of the year. You will see tens of thousands of avid worshippers. I do not disparage this. I am saying we need to learn from this. People will worship something! In football stadiums the bands and cheerleaders coach people into worshipping, not by giving directions but by worshipping themselves. Their worship coaxes others to join in. Every worship leader, instrumentalist, band member, and vocalist needs to understand that their primary responsibility in the stadium is to worship God. They need to understand the contagious nature of worship and the critical role it plays in

missional renewal of the church. There is hardly anything more evangelistically powerful than a group of worshiping believers.

### **Apply Biblical Truth to Life and Relationships**

Jesus promised abundant life. Why do we settle for less? We have separated people's heads from the rest of their bodies in church and aimed our spiritual "education" to hit them above the shoulders. We have believed that if people get enough Bible information it will automatically transform their lives. Wrong! **The devil knows more Bible than most church members in North America and can sign off on our doctrinal statements, but this knowledge has not transformed him.** Jesus told the Pharisees that they didn't get the point in their study of the Scriptures. "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me" (John 5:39, NIV). These Bible scholars missed the point. The point is Jesus!

Our approach to biblical study must not stop short of applying to life. Bible study for the head only leads to arrogance and dangerous religious bigotry. It misses the main truth. The Bible is the story of God's determination to woo human beings with his heart so he can transform them with his love and partner with them in his redemptive mission in the world.

### **Minister to Others in Jesus' Name**

Both parts of this statement are crucial. Ministry to others keeps our experience with God from becoming merely a consumerist activity. It is the antidote to the self-absorption and self-centeredness that threatens to further privatize our American culture.

Equally key is the idea of ministering "in Jesus' name." This is the missional expression of the love of God. To give to others in Jesus' name is not an imperialist act but a loving introduction to the main truth about God's interest in people. His main goal is a loving relationship, not to control people's behavior. Love changes

people's behavior. There are ways I serve my wife because of my love for her, not because she has a list posted on the refrigerator door of ways I need to behave. Unfortunately, many people see God this way. They see him as someone trying to gain entrance into their lives just so he can post some rules. What if we communicated to church members that Jesus elevated having love for our neighbors to the level of the second commandment, superceded only by the command to love God? What if every small group, every Sunday School class, every task group, and every believer were coached into ways to minister in Jesus' name, not as an add-on activity but as central to their spiritual development?

### **Share the Faith with Pre-Christians**

Part of the spiritual formation of followers of Jesus surely should involve helping them know how to introduce Jesus into conversations and be able to pass along pertinent insights to people who are being drawn to God. Because we have made evangelism a sales activity in the North American church, we have reduced how much of it goes on. In many cases, we're not peddling Jesus—we're peddling the church, with the assumption that if people will come to the church and convert to churchianity they will get Jesus. What they often get is a poor substitute. **Evangelism that will introduce Jesus to this culture will flow from people who are deeply in love with Jesus.** It has happened before—in the Book of Acts. Their relationship with Jesus was what the early Christian community had to share with the world. They didn't have a Roman road, a New Testament, or any doctrinal treatises or "plan of salvation." They had Jesus. And people knew it. Their love for him turned the world upside down.

### **Cooperate and Partner with Other Believers in the Mission of God**

Christianity was never intended to be a private affair. Community is something we find in the nature of God himself (the Trinity).

Belonging to others is part of a healthy expression of life. God's designs for humanity include family, and he is building a family to enjoy for eternity. Since Abraham God has been in search of a people who will partner with him in sharing his story with others. Part of spiritual formation is learning to be part of this family, including committing energy to other family members and sharing possessions, giving money to the cause, doing family chores (somebody has to do dishes at family feasts).

**The communal aspect of spiritual formation is often neglected in a North American culture that has too often turned church membership to consumerism.** The vast majority are there to get what they can, while a few with the need to serve or who have overactive responsibility glands pour on the work. This situation is a far cry from a healthy church life where each person would be contributing to others for his or her own growth. Our strengths, our gifts, and our talents are also our needs. If we have a talent to sing, draw, arrange, communicate, and so forth, we need to do this in order to grow and find fulfillment.

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## **“School” in the Emerging World**

In the modern world, how would we typically approach the spiritual learning objectives we've just identified? We'd write a curriculum, produce a conference, convene a class, create a study course, recruit a teacher or other expert, sign people up, teach the material to the students, and pass out completion certificates. Then we would wonder what would happen or change as a result of the experience. The truth is that we have very little evidence that academic or conferential learning changes behavior.

Just today a colleague with a new assignment punctuated how deeply steeped we are in this old approach to learning. My coworker has the responsibility for facilitating prayer for spiritual awakening throughout our state. He wants to mobilize people all over South Carolina to pray for the outpouring of God's Spirit. He and I have talked about some of the ways he will foster this

movement. This past week he has begun to receive pressure to “have a conference” on prayer. This is the way typical denominational types think and act. (Let me ask you: If the world could be changed through conferences and seminars, wouldn’t it have happened a long time ago?) We don’t need a conference on prayer. We need people to pray! People don’t need notebooks on how to pray for spiritual awakening; they need encouragement to seek the heart of God. Before it’s over, if we follow the typical path, we’ll wind up with “certified” prayer warriors. I’m sure this will help God sort out which petitioners to listen to.

I had lunch with a pastor yesterday who asked me to help him figure out a development plan for his senior ministerial staff. He didn’t ask me to come to his church to share my expertise with his staff. He asked me where I would suggest he send his staff members in their various roles to experience top-flight ministries. My contribution was to help him get in touch with practitioners. My value was in helping to frame the learning agenda, then brokering learning opportunities. I was a learning facilitator. This is often the role of interventionists in the new reality.

These two examples serve to introduce some of the significant shifts we must take into account if we want to help people grow in the emerging world.

## **From Teaching to Learning**

The academic model for the last several hundred years involved an expert (teacher) who had information and disseminated it to less-informed people (students). This was the basic plot that developed into millions of episodes of death-by-lecture.

This story line is increasingly disintegrating in its believability. Students can now obtain more information over the Internet overnight than a teacher can deliver in lecture form in a month’s time. The issue now is *learning*, how to make sense out of the information that is available. **The agenda is more and more being set by the learner.** In the emerging world learners will decide

what they want to learn, when they want to learn, and how they will learn (on-line, face-to-face, text, project, and so on).

### **From Curriculum and Text-Driven to Life-Driven**

In the modern world spiritual formation was thought to be accomplished by taking a student through a prescribed group of texts that addressed topics in a curricular approach. This is so deeply ingrained in us that we approach almost any learning experience in the church this way. **Only in the modern world would you find people huddled together reading literature produced by mission agencies as a primary approach to mission “education” or would you convene a conference for people to spend all day taking notes in a notebook on fasting and prayer. This feels “normal” to us.** In the world that is dawning, the curriculum approach to growing people is increasingly viewed as a supplemental strategy to the primary approach: learning agendas driven by life issues and informed by life experiences.

**Jesus facilitated spiritual formation in his disciples by introducing them to life situations and then helping them debrief their experiences.** He taught them to pray. He did not lead them in a study course on prayer. He took them on mission trips (Samaria, for example); he didn't read books to them on the subject of missions. He sent them on learning junkets and exposed them to situations. He asked their opinion on what they were hearing and observing (“Who do you say that I am?”). He asked for radical obedience from them. He asked them to take up a cross and follow him. He did not send them to school and wait for them to graduate before giving them a significant assignment. He sent them out before they were ready to go and then helped them learn from their experiences. He talked about the kingdom of God, but mostly he lived the kingdom of God, practicing a life in front of his followers that modeled very different core values than those given to them by the Pharisees in the synagogues.

Helping people grow, particularly in the arena of spiritual formation, is about unpacking life: challenging our emotional responses that are destructive (envy, hatred, bitterness); challenging our biases (racial prejudice, social and economic elitism, intellectual snobbery); challenging our assumptions (“my needs are the most important”); challenging our responses; unpacking our frustrations, our hopes, our dreams, and our disappointments; bringing life to God rather than teaching about God, somehow hoping to get him into our life.

Curriculum-driven is artificial; life-driven is organic. Curriculum-driven is arbitrary; life-driven is circumstantially sensitive. Curriculum-driven is categorical; life-driven is personal. I am not suggesting that curriculum has no place. It does. In my experience with small groups, curriculum does help to convene the spirit of the learners to focus the discussion or prompt a place to begin. Curriculum in its best use provides a stage upon which learners can launch their own life stories for review and learning.

I believe in the power of community in learning, particularly in helping us make behavioral applications of what we learn. That is why I am such a proponent of small groups. The consistent challenge I run into when discussing small groups is the prevalent notion that small groups should function primarily in a curriculum mode (a Bible study, text-driven experience). This is why groups can move from one curriculum piece to another and never experience any real growth. Effective groups where people grow allow people to declare to each other what is going on in their lives, what they’d like to see going on in their lives, and what kind of help and accountability they need to move toward their hopes and away from their frustrations. This brings life to the table, not a book!

## **From Classroom to Living Room**

In the new world the place of learning has shifted from the classroom (academic model) to the living room (life learning). Online learning is just one expression of this shift, allowing people

to engage learning from their homes at their convenience. It also shows up in the rising popularity of small group experiences that meet in homes, office buildings, bookstores, at the health club (wherever “living” is going on). It is why innovative companies are providing less institutional “canteen” space and conference rooms and more space like coffee bars and dens where staff can interact and share ideas. At the building where I have an office we are renovating space right now for staff that is off-limits to visitors; it is a “family room” where staff can hang out. I predict we will eventually renovate some of our sterile conference areas into more relaxed spaces, using lamp lighting rather than fluorescent fixtures, with coffee tables rather than conference tables.

**This shift raises the question of why churches spend millions of dollars building file cabinets to put people in for an hour or two each week (we call it “educational space”) when the most effective spiritual formation does not occur in these settings.** The local church already has more Sunday School space than it needs, and people are already paying for it. It’s called a home mortgage.

The issue in spiritual formation is bigger than just location. It involves a philosophy of where spiritual formation is centered. In the modern world spiritual instruction was owned and operated by the institution of the church. In premodern and postmodern cultures the home was and is the center for spiritual formation.

The student ministry where my family attends already knows about this shift of spiritual formation into living space. The students meet in homes throughout the week (mostly Sunday evenings) for small group discipleship. The small groups are convened by leaders whose primary requirement for the assignment is that they love young people and are willing to coach them in their life development (in other words, they are not recruited as teachers). The groups are noncurriculum driven. They focus on the lives of individual young people who talk about their spiritual journeys, challenge one another for growth, pray for each other, and receive encouragement. They provide the questions that



prompt the God-answers. The setting in homes is critical for creating the kind of atmosphere and environment where these kids will open up and share their life struggles.

A second practice in this student ministry is also headed in the right direction. The student minister provides to parents each week a synopsis of the topics covered in the large group worship and teaching times, along with some questions the parents can use to help create conversations with their teenagers about spiritual issues. This moves them past the “How was church today?” question. I am amazed at how our best church families have no clue as to how to have conversations at home about spiritual subjects.

**Churches are so busy getting people involved at the church that they’ve neglected this fundamental agenda of spiritual formation.** The typical church family leaves spiritual stuff to what happens at the church, thereby delegating spiritual formation to the institution. And the institution encourages it! What if churches cut down on church activities so people could have some conversations within their own families? What if we facilitated this even at church as a beginning point? What if parents spent as much time with the children’s minister as the children do? What if student ministers spent as much time with students’ parents as they did the students? This would be a shift for most church expectations of staff. We typically hire children’s and student ministers to run programs for children and young people. In fact, this approach by the church may do more to decimate the home as a spiritual center than anything coming into the home on television or the Internet.

### **From Didactic to Experiential**

The effectiveness of most educational “experiences” has little to do with the student; it is mostly about the teacher’s communication abilities as evidenced by students’ test scores. We cannot afford this teacher-centrism in a church mission to help people grow. The issue has to be whether any life transformation is occur-

ring; more specifically, disciples need to have a sense that they are growing spiritually by giving evidence of personal development. This means learners making personal investments, interacting with other learners, being open to coaching and accountability, and being able to “participate” in their own life learning.

Cathy, my wife, recently conducted a spiritual encounter session for pastors’ wives at a retreat. She “sacralized” a hotel conference room by setting a couple hundred votive candles around the perimeter of the room. After a brief time of corporate worship the participants were allowed to customize their experience with God by being able to visit one or more stations that had been set up for them. One station included a collection of crosses and communion ware. Another station presented participants a pile of stones that could be moved from one spot to another to symbolize releasing a problem to God. Another station provided paper, art brushes, paints, and drawing pencils for those who wanted to write, paint, or draw. Still another section was available for special prayer intercession by a leader. The worship experience was actually customized by the participants themselves. Their experience reflected their need at that moment.

### **From Privatized Learning to Team Learning Environments**

Maybe there was a day when it made sense for people to engage in privatized learning (in academic settings, even competing against each other for grades). But in a connected, relational economy the key to individual success is no longer an individual matter—it’s about teams. So why shouldn’t our educational methodology match up to the challenge that confronts us all—working with other people to accomplish life? Certainly in the arena of spiritual formation the developmental process preferably involves other people. Other people provide the challenge to character development. (I remember making the discovery after I got married of how impatient I was. It was much easier to be patient before someone else had a claim on the same time I did.

That wasn't the only character deficiency that surfaced, but I'm too modest to go into all that.)

Team learning environments involve small groups when people covenant together for growth. It also involves mentoring relationships, from the one-on-one to the one-to-three or whatever ratio. Team learning also occurs in ministry teams in which people work together on ministry tasks or projects. You can find out a lot about yourself when you work with people who have personalities or ideas very different from yours.

### **From Scripted to Shaped**

In the modern world of mass standardization, education became scripted and curriculum based. Degree programs are still put together by curriculum requirements, often with prerequisites governing when you can take what. All students proceed at the same pace. You start in August, have exams in December, and after a prescribed number of courses you graduate. This is what I mean by scripted. In the emerging world the learning development process will be more shaped than scripted. This possibility is conceivable because of the information revolution, the ubiquitous availability of the information that used to be locked up in textbooks, classrooms, and teachers. Learners will proceed at their own pace (why should you have to wait for the whole class to get it?) and learn the way they learn best.

Sitting across from me just this minute is my college freshman daughter. I am writing and drinking coffee while she has tea and calculus. When she closed her calculus book I casually asked, "You finished?" She replied, "All I had to do was read." Then she added, "Why don't they write math books so someone like me (a more hands-on, practical, concrete learner) can understand them?" I followed up, "So how will you learn what's in there?" She sighed. "I'll have to get my roommate to explain it to me or work a few problems in class." For her, math needs to be a team sport (she won a savings bond in elementary school as part of a math team

in a competition—it's the last time math was fun and easy for her to grasp).

The implication for spiritual development is pretty obvious. The spiritual formation process should be customized and shaped to the learner for intentional outcomes. We see this in the Bible. God dealt differently with Moses than with Peter, Paul, and Judas. The person development process is highly labor intensive. God works through all of our lives to shape us into the person he dreams we could be. **The community of faith should be an environment where the number one pursuit is the development of human beings created in the image of God and redeemed into his family through Jesus.**

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Today I heard about a group of eleven ten-year-old boys who attend the same church I do. They have adopted a name for themselves—Band of Brothers. They have made a pact with each other to hold each other accountable all the way through junior high and high school. Included in the items of accountability are abstaining from alcohol and drug use, treating girls right, and incorporating some spiritual disciplines into their lives. They have given each other permission to coach and encourage each other in personal life development. They have created a learning community among themselves. The topic: life. They have captured the dynamics of creating an environment that helps people develop.

May their tribe increase!